

## Franky reborn:

Discourses on the first transgender character in the Flemish soap *Thuis*

Florian Vanlee, Frederik Dhaenens, & Sofie Van Bauwel

***Draft only, do not cite***

### Abstract

This paper argues through a textual and contextual analysis of the first trans character in the Flemish soap opera *Thuis* that in Flanders, trans identities and practices are rendered intelligible through inherently homogenizing and normative discourses. While these identities and practices are diverse by definition, this research shows that only a very specific configuration of them is validated and privileged – such as post-op transwomen – while all others – like transmen and genderqueer identities – are symbolically annihilated. Specifically, discourses on trans identities subscribe to hegemonic conceptions of gender, prescribing a full surgical transition from one monolithic gender to the other, while denying the possibility of a radically subversive queer space in between. This gender conformity is further enforced by the construction of physical beauty as the defining feature of a successful transition, and the representation of trans identities as simply “longing to be on the other side.” Finally, the apparent positive representation of trans identities collide with articulations of homonationalism – or transnationalism – that construct Flanders as a safe space for transpeople, while relegating all internal instances of transphobic violence to ethnic-cultural minorities.

## Introduction

With LGBT characters appearing as early as 1995, the Flemish domestic television fiction industry displays an undeniable practice of representing sexual diversity in its output (e.g. Franco, 2001; Dhoest, 2007). Nevertheless, an exploratory overview of its history illustrates how this tendency to integrate non-normative sexual identities in fictional narratives has had few progressive ramifications for the portrayal of gender diversity. However, paralleling the considerable pop-cultural attention conferred on transpeople and genderqueer identities in the U.S. in recent years – with Caitlyn Jenner’s highly mediatized transition, series like *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013–) or motion pictures such as *The Danish Girl* (Tom Hooper, 2015) – Flanders now has its first recurring trans character in domestic television, Kaat Bomans in the long-running and immensely popular soap opera *Thuis* (At Home) (1995–).

Hence, the first steps have been taken towards increasing the exposure of transpeople in Western popular television fiction (Lovelock, 2016). As was the case in the growing televisibility of gay and lesbian people since the 1990s, however, this does not necessarily translate into progressive or nuanced representational strategies (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002). Indeed, even after two decades of seemingly laudable portrayals of non-normative sexualities in popular television fiction, normative discourses privileging heterosexuality remain the dominant mechanisms to render sexual diversity intelligible in pop culture (see Lotz, 2014; Chambers, 2009; Davis & Needham, 2009; Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002). More often than not, heteronormative LGB characters make the cut rather than queer people whose sexual and gender identity destabilize hegemonic conceptions of what is considered normal. When represented, sexual and gender diversity should fit snugly into inert late modern interpretations of sexuality that do not pose a threat to the discursive status quo.

Because of the specific etiology of trans experiences – positioned precariously and subjected to intersecting discourses on sex, sexuality, and gender – trans narratives are even more susceptible to normative representations, as envisioned trans experiences destabilize each of these interrelated categories of intelligibility (Stryker, 2004). Furthermore, trans experiences are particular and singular rather than collective, yet run the risk of being homogenized, even in the inclusionary project of queer theory (Hines, 2006). Given the difficult relationship between a radical poststructuralist political venture like queer theory and the conceptualization of trans experiences, it is not hard to imagine even more powerful homogenizing and normative discourses at work in the pop-cultural representation of transpeople.

By way of a deconstruction of the trans narrative found in *Thuis* and an analysis of the surrounding public debate on trans issues in the Flemish written press, we aim to identify the dominant discourses

active in the representational strategies that render trans experiences intelligible in Flemish popular culture. As trans experiences are especially vulnerable to normative and homogenizing discourses, we pay specific attention to examples of both reductionist discourses and possible counterhegemonic representational strategies.

## Discourses on trans identities

Adopting a perspective on gender derived from the burgeoning field of queer theory, we consider the moniker *transgender* to be an umbrella term, encapsulating countless practices, identities, and experiences (Forsyth & Copes, 2014). As such, we define “transgender” as a nucleus of identities and practices that communicate unease with fitting into hegemonic gender categories, and the wish to personally disregard or even subvert these dominant conceptions of human gender and sexuality (Stryker, 2008; Tebutt, 2013). As gender remains one of the prime categories through which social life is rendered intelligible (see Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Butler, 2000), however, even the most legible transgender identities and practices continue to be met with incomprehension and various forms of violence (Lombardi et al., 2002; Meyer, 2012). This violence may include verbal or physical attacks, but also entails pervasive regimes of symbolic violence that demarcate the boundaries of hegemonically warranted gender performances and discursively force transgender identities and experiences outside of what is considered “normal” gendered behavior (Samuel, 2013; Stryker, 2004).

Precisely because of the inability to define what “transgender” specifically means, the practices and identities the concept envelops are susceptible to the normative and homogenizing discourses that enact symbolic violence on transpeople. These instances of symbolic violence may be clear-cut and easily readable, such as the transphobic discourse active in those representations that portray transpeople as dangerously deranged killers (Sullivan, 2000), or may operate through subtle articulations of normative prescriptions of “proper” transgendered performance (Vipond, 2015). Among these less opaque discursive processes of assigning meaning to transgendered subjects, the mutually productive dyad formed by the general hegemonic conceptions of human gender and the powerful medical-psychological discourse are arguably the most pervasive (e.g. Schuh, 2006; Keller, 1999). In this dynamic, dominant notions of human gender performance problematize transgender identities owing to their fundamental deviance from these norms, while the medical-psychological discourse provides a pathologized, and therefore easily containable, identity as a solution. This circular conception with transgender-as-problem and (surgical) gender conformity as the solution disregards the spectrum of gender and ultimately reifies the hegemonic gender order and discredits all things queer in between. Of course, contemporaneous culture could also provide a space for queer

conceptions of transpeople that acknowledge the fundamentally complex and non-binary nature of gender journeys (Dhaenens, 2015), but these articulations are often overshadowed by more pervasive discourses.

## Methodology

Our sample was composed of two large bodies of data: the episodes of *Thuis* for our textual analysis, and the coverage of the introduction of the trans storyline and related trans issues in Flemish factual media respectively. The first part of the sample, on which we conducted our textual analysis, comprised the second half of *Thuis*' twenty-first season, which aired from January 4<sup>th</sup> to June 24<sup>th</sup> 2016; as the soap opera is shown daily on weekdays, this provided a total of 125 episodes. Opting for this large sample facilitated the selection of episodes and sequences especially pertinent to our study, be it because of their specific representation of trans issues, their noteworthy lack thereof, or their discursive importance in the surrounding public debate. In addition, the selection of a hefty sample greatly reduced the risk that our study would only produce a snapshot of the discourse on trans issues in contemporaneous Flemish society rather than a representative overview (Carvalho, 2008). The 125-episode selection was subjected to a textual analysis, with the intent to grasp the meaning assigned to the trans identities represented within the text (Larsen, 2002). However, as the research subject was a soap opera, a genre displaying a limited degree of cinematographic techniques to construct meaning, the focus lay on what Vos (2004) dubs the "narrative" and "ideological" levels of analysis, rather than the "filmic."

The heterogeneous public debate sparked by the inclusion of a trans-related storyline in the soap opera was rather diverse and required an inductive approach based on existing theoretical work on transpeople. In this study, we aimed to address this problem of manageability by focusing on established – one might even say traditional – media, rather than including the public debate hosted on social media. Although the inclusion of discussions on, for example, Facebook might yield interesting results on specific constructions of gender and sexual diversity in contemporaneous Flemish society, they are of less value to a study that approaches the topic from a perspective that establishes gender categories as the products of specific power relations. Therefore, firmly grounded in a quantitative argument, our factual sample comprised trans-related coverage found in Flanders' four main newspapers (*De Morgen*, *De Standaard*, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, and *Het Nieuwsblad*), consisting of two outlets considered to be "quality" periodicals (*De Morgen* and *De Standaard*) and two "popular" newspapers (*Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Het Nieuwsblad*). To collect coverage of trans issues in Flanders,

we relied on *Gopress*, an online database of the Flemish written press that allows a keyword-based search. These keywords comprised, on the one hand, tags related to the soap opera narrative itself (“*Thuis*,” “*Franky*,” “*Franky Bomans*,” “*Kaat Bomans*,” “*Jef Hoogmartens*,” and “*Leen Dendievel*”), and general keywords pertaining to trans issues (“*transgender*,” “*transsexual*,” “*transition*,” “*queer*,” and “*shemale*”) on the other hand.

Data collection pertaining to the public debate on trans-related subjects in Flanders resulted in an overall sample of 127 articles in the written press, of which 40 were explicitly connected to *Thuis*. The primary analysis of these articles followed an inductive model based both on key insights derived from the existing theoretical corpus on transpeople and the specific needs of this research regarding the public debate sparked by the introduction of a trans storyline in a popular domestic soap opera. In this stage, we coded five main elements: the usage of the term “*transgender*” (1), whether or not this referred to “*transsexuality*” as opposed to the more complex interpretation of transgenderism (2), whether or not the article referred to “*transphobic violence*” (3), the referral to or absence of “*gender reassignment surgery*” in the article (4), and whether the article was connected to the soap opera *Thuis* (5). We then followed up this primary analysis using a second set of variables to understand the results more fully. Variable (1) and (2) were complimented by adding a variable pertaining to the “*binary representation of gender*” in the article, enabling a more thorough understanding of the meaning encapsulated in the term “*transgender*.” Meanwhile, we added a variable pertaining to the “*place and perpetrator*” to variable (3) to research the possible articulations of homonationalism (Puar, 2007; 2013) in the discourse on transphobic violence. Finally, the mentioning of “*good looks*” was found to be an important element in coverage of transpeople, and therefore was also coded.

## *Thuis*

As Flanders’ most popular soap opera, *Thuis* currently reaches an average of a fourth of the viewers in its timeslot (CIM, 2016) of 8.10 p.m. to 8.40 p.m. The soap opera is aired daily in this primetime slot, a position the show has occupied since its introduction to public broadcasting service VRT in 1995. Originally conceived as the Flemish version of *EastEnders* (BBC, 1985–) (Franco, 2001), *Thuis* adheres to what Liebes and Livingstone (1992) have dubbed the “*community model*” of the soap opera. Community soap operas, mainly found in public broadcasting service output (Hobson, 2003), present viewers with a spatially defined community composed of several core families and their surrounding unrelated characters (Liebes & Livingstone, 1992). The preference for such a community-based approach towards soap opera narratives by PBS networks is a strong strategic choice, in the sense that

it provides an opportunity to touch upon delicate social issues without compromising their stipulated neutrality. Having multiple families does not only provide the opportunity to integrate, for example, families from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds with relative ease, but also provides the narrative with ample characters to relay differing opinions on social issues, hence minimizing possible claims of network partisanship (Franco, 2001). This possibility to portray a diversity of not only social issues, but also a multiplicity of opinions formulated about the issues raised, has led academics like Christine Geraghty to describe the community soap opera as constantly operating on the fleeting boundary between the public and the private (2012), creating accessible opportunities for the viewers to engage in public debate about issues with which they otherwise might not come into contact.

The community displayed in *Thuis* consists of several families sharing familial, professional, and emotional ties. From the lower-working-class family consisting of Eddy van Noteghem and his now ex-wife Nancy to the upper-class household centered around Marianne Bastiaens, *Thuis* seemingly aims to provide a realistic overview of Flemish society. Despite the fact that the show's representation of the social diversity in contemporaneous Flanders has been described as "tokenistic" (Franco, 2001; Dhoest, 2007), the soap currently portrays a family consisting of two mothers, Ann and Mayra, and their adopted daughter Sandrine, Adil – a builder of Moroccan descent – and Jessica, whose queer sexuality remains unlabeled, both by herself and others. While the argument certainly holds ground that these characters are often implemented because *Thuis* must comply with diversity charters implemented by the VRT (Saeyns, 2007), even Judith Franco's critical description of an older storyline featuring a North African plumber defying racist customers (Franco, 2001) suggests a certain empathy at work in the representation of diversity in the soap opera.

The protagonist of this paper is Franky Bomans, who through the course of the twenty-first season underwent several gender reassignment procedures, culminating in his bottom surgery and subsequent full transition into womanhood as Kaat. Kaat's gender journey, however, is not the first time the character had struggled with his identity. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth seasons, Franky seemed unsatisfied with his relationship with his girlfriend and fell in love with his best friend, Bram. Coming to terms with his sexuality, he was shown to have a short-lived romance with a man named Max, although Franky found it difficult to deal with his boyfriend's superficial perspective on relationships. Later, he became acquainted with and engaged to Tibo, a male nurse whom he married during the finale of the seventeenth season. Initially, their married life was a happy one, though sometimes obviously strained by the mishaps indigenous to a soap opera, and Tibo and Franky seemed to revel in their newfound domestic life. Both men comfortably identified as male, and their relationship was not only based on intimate care and a desire for each other, but also seemed to involve a certain degree of "best buddies" camaraderie.

## Kaat's transition

Franky's journey towards his new identity as Kaat commences in the United States, for Flanders the historical locus on which the myth of technological and social progress is projected. For their belated honeymoon, Tibo and Franky ventured to San Francisco for a road trip on the West Coast in season 19 of the soap (September 2<sup>nd</sup> 2012 to May 30<sup>th</sup> 2013). The weather, atmosphere, and queer community of California proved a more enjoyable living environment for the couple, and they ultimately decided to stay. Apart from some sporadic Skype conversations home, the couple was largely off the radar for the entire twentieth season, until Franky contacted his family to inform them he had been struggling with some "personal issues." At the very end of the season, he admitted that he and Tibo had separated and said he would be visiting home to celebrate his parents' twentieth anniversary. At the party thrown for the occasion, Franky finally divulged the reason for his divorce: he struggled with his gender identity and wished to become a woman. He informed his parents that he had already initiated hormonal treatment, and had scheduled cosmetic surgery designed to give him a more feminine appearance. His final transition, in the form of gender reassignment surgery, would take place in Belgium, however, as he wished to live his new life as a woman among his friends and family.

As such, Franky's journey towards fully becoming Kaat was largely obscured by his absence in the United States. In fact, most of the discourse assigned to Franky's transition within the diegesis of *Thuis* was deceptively elliptical. When one of his best friends returned from a trip to San Francisco to offer support to his newly divorced friend – before the news of Franky's plans had reached his family – he mysteriously claimed that some big news would follow shortly. One of the few scenes featuring a conversation between Franky and his grandmother only showed her empathic reaction to his news: "Maar jongen toch, dat gij daar al die tijd mee hebt moeten rondlopen" ("Oh, sweetheart, this must have been such a rough experience for you"). It is only after Franky's official statement regarding his wish to become Kaat that he gains some agency regarding his own narrative. Kaat makes several calls to her mother, in which she describes the complicated nature of the procedures and the risk involved in the operations, although she is in a fantastic mood. In February, Kaat finally makes a physical appearance in the show; apart from the actual gender reassignment surgery, she is a woman in all formal aspects.

Of course, Franky's journey towards her new life as Kaat is a valid one, and may indeed be recognizable to many others with similar doubts about their gender identity, particularly in terms of the burning wish to transition from one gender to the other. Furthermore, the elliptical narrative structure employed to first create curiosity about Franky's personal issues, which could then be unveiled during the dramatic season finale, may well be ascribed to the reigning tropes in the soap genre, which after

all is a popular entertainment form. Citing this particularity of Kaat's individual experiences as a redeeming quality, however, is quite impossible, because her seemingly "particular" narrative is in fact the only trans narrative found in Flemish media, as the discourse informing the representational strategies in *Thuis* parallel those found in the public debate. In very general terms, they display several identifiable tendencies that homogenize trans experiences into a single intelligible socio-cultural narrative, saturating the signification processes involved with trans themes.

These representations first construct trans experiences as able to be reduced to a scheme of discomfort with one's assigned gender identity, thus resulting in a longing to adhere to the other monolithic gender identity without providing space for non-normative constructions of gender. Second, they historicize and downplay the experience of what might be called the "trans journey" in favor of its destination. Moreover, they propose the full surgical gender transition as the clear-cut and only destination of the trans journey, both by saturating the means of signification concerning trans people and by ridiculing the journey. Ultimately, they reaffirm hegemonic conceptions of gender by shifting the focus from the emotional and mental dimensions of the trans journey to the visual and physical success of the surgical gender transition.

## Trans constructions in Flanders

Both the trans narrative in *Thuis* and those found in the mediated public debate indicate one important dimension of the construction of trans experiences in Flanders: transpeople undergo an emotional and mental struggle with their assigned gender and subsequently want to completely "cross over" to the other side.

Although the trans journey represented in *Thuis* was largely elliptical, the few shreds of conversation between Franky-becoming-Kaat and his/her significant others clearly illustrate the Flemish trans journey as being based on the binary conception of gender. Informing his parents of his gender transition plans, Franky tells them that this is "something he always felt lingering inside." He had "tried to subdue it," but it was becoming "too obvious to ignore"; he finally wanted to become "who he really was." Hence, Franky essentially claims he wishes to become a woman, and that he had been a woman all along, deep inside. Easy criticisms based on the fact that Franky previously displayed an utterly masculine gender performance – for example, his occupation as a plumber, his later investment in the bar of choice for the working class male characters in the soap, or his reliability as the person who would physically protect his friends and family – aside, Franky does clearly categorize the gendered social world from a strict binary perspective. Furthermore, by telling his parents that this wish had



always been lingering within him, he refers to an essential quality of femaleness present in his experiences of his own identity, again creating a strict and insurmountable difference between the male and female gender and disregarding the possibility of a grey area between those hegemonic constructions where gender may be experienced outside of the dominant binary model.

The same narrative baseline materializes in the public debate on trans experiences in Flemish newspaper articles. If and when transpeople are assigned some degree of agency in their own stories in the Flemish written press, they adhere to the binary system of thought so dominant in the intelligibility of gender. Their empathic and relatable stories report on the trans experience as being confusing and frightening, but they are relatively straightforward and lucid in terms of the resolution of these mental and emotional struggles, in terms of transitioning from one hegemonically produced gender to the other (e.g. Vermeiren, 2015; Remmery, 2015; Michiels, 2015; Buekenhoudt, 2016; Clemens, 2016; Vandenweghe, 2016). As was the case with the etymological source of the cis-trans binary – the classical Roman geographical division between Gallia Cis- and Transalpina (Simpson & Weiner, 1991) – gender in Flanders is divided into two almost geographically monolithic sides of a spectrum. The Alps – or the dangerously queer spaces between the two hegemonic genders – however, seem to be forgotten.

Thus, the fluidity of gender and the related acknowledgement of its non-binary nature are lost in the hegemonic definition of gender according to biological conceptions of male and female. Consequently, “transgender” as a concept is often deceptively misused in the Flemish public debate, as it actually denotes transsexual people who have undergone a surgical transition to alter their primary sexual characteristics from the one sex to the other. Furthermore, the only trans identity rendered visible in the Flemish public debate is that of the post-op transwoman. Indeed, from the 127 newspaper articles related to trans issues, practices, and experiences included in the sample of this study, a mere 13 of them correctly communicated that “transgender” should be employed as an umbrella term that does not simply entail full surgical gender transitions, while only two of them featured transmen. Apart from this obvious and ontologically based dimension, the process of saturated signification regarding trans issues is further enforced by more subtle strategies in Flemish popular media.

## Far away journeys of the past

While Kaat’s journey is not featured firsthand in the series, the audience is afforded a glimpse of the process, with other characters functioning as proxies for her story. Their representation of this journey,

and because of the absence of a firsthand narrative its only representation, assigns several problematic meanings to the experiences of trans identities.

A first dimension may be found in the grammatical tenses used in other characters' discourse on Kaat's transition. In every conversation about Kaat in which her friends and family engage after her return, fully feminine in appearance, characters continuously employ the past tense in referring to the physical, mental, and emotional difficulties she must have undergone to finally attain her goal of becoming a woman. In doing so, they deceptively historicize the trans experience. On the one hand, they attribute the possible transphobic incidents she may have been confronted with to the intermediary state she has now left behind her; on the other hand, they construct the prospect of Kaat's surgical gender transition as a salvation that will enable her to genuinely live as a woman in the future, therefore nullifying the possibility of future transphobia in Kaat's life. Becoming is disregarded in favor of being, in the sense that the road is represented to be rough, but the result is more than worth the risk. Problematic here is that this view favors gender conforming and surgical transition to "stopping along the way," and communicates that transgenders should hold their imposed destination of fully becoming another gender in high regard. Moreover, this latter dimension is enforced further by the absence of actual transphobia within *Thuis'* diegesis. Although Frank (her father) certainly does not approve of her gender transition and *de facto* disowns her, his emotional state is not represented as being transphobic *per se*, but rather as that of a father who is heartbroken by his son's decisions. This lukewarm portrayal of mild transphobia is strengthened by the way Frank is reflexive about his attitude towards Kaat; he hates himself for not being able to accept his daughter for who she is, rather than hating his daughter for who she is.

The historization of Kaat's journey also carries with it a more subtle dimension, related to the narrative containment of the storyline in its exportation to the United States. As characters comment on the terrible burden Kaat must have carried throughout her period of being neither male nor female, they effectively communicate the idea that her ordeal, as constituted by ridicule, mockery, or downright violence, is not only a far cry in a temporal sense, but maybe even more importantly, in a spatial sense. Transphobia, gender normative bigotry, and all other forms of physical or symbolic violence committed against transpeople are exported to the exotic United States, snugly reconfirming Flanders' self-professed label of social and cultural progressivity and tolerance. This tendency is also manifestly present in newspaper coverage of transgenderism. The use of violence against trans people is reported in two cases: it either happens abroad, and as such does not threaten the construction of Flanders as a progressive and tolerant community (e.g. Vanlommel, 2015; "Prostituee gedood omdat ze transgender was," 2015; Maas, 2016; Debaets, 2016), or it is committed by ethnic or cultural minorities, thus not posing a threat to the nationalist construction of the Flemish people as

transpositive (e.g. “Transgender Aangevallen in Brussel,” 2016; “Transgender (26) Neergestoken ‘door IS’ers’ Neergestoken in Etterbeek,” 2016; Parys, 2016). This kind of coverage also neglects to reflect the reality of transphobic violence in Flanders, which is mostly committed by relatives and acquaintances of the victims (Motmans, 2012). There are ample examples, however, of laudable tales of trans inclusion in Flanders (Van Hoof & Debaets, 2016; “Almaar Mooier maar Minder Krachtig,” 2016; Vermeiren, 2015), further enforcing the construction of Flanders as a region of tolerance and progressivity.

## Finally a woman?

The fact that the surgical transition is the only part of Kaat’s journey featured in the show’s narrative is extremely meaningful. Instead of devoting precious airtime to the complex, layered, and ambivalent experiences connected to the mental and emotional process of becoming a woman, *Thuis* synthesized the entire journey in one fixed destination: the surgical transition. This results in two specific sets of meaning: it first establishes the transgender as different, as a constructed woman, and therefore not a woman. Second, and contrarily, it praises gender conformity in transgendered identities, and presents the post-op transsexual as the most acceptable form of trans practice, even though it obviously does not represent full womanhood.

*Thuis* propagates this ideological construction on several levels. The most obvious and tangible is evident in the way Kaat is positioned in the narrative: conveniently, most characters are aware of her transgender identity, and as such refrain from transphobic responses, opting to treat her as if she were biologically born female. *Thuis*’s resident stud, Toon, however, is unaware of her gender transition and rather than treating her as transgender, he perceives her as biologically female and subsequently starts pursuing her romantically. Their mutual friends deem it Kaat’s own choice and responsibility to inform her lustful suitor, a disclosure prolonged for dramatic effect. After Toon’s rather pitiful and unanswered paraphrasing of Hugh Grant’s profession of love to Julia Roberts in *Notting Hill* (Michell, 1999), Kaat checks in at the hospital to undergo the final procedure of her gender reassignment surgery. Only aware of Kaat’s check-in at the hospital, while unaware of the reasons for it, Toon attempts to visit her. Just before entering her room, Toon runs into Kaat’s mother, who finally informs him that her daughter used to be her son. Shocked, confused, and most importantly betrayed, Toon flees the hospital and avoids the woman he had minutes before planned to shower with presents and flowers.

Apart from the fact that this narrative clearly subscribes to established strategies of representing transpeople as “passers to be discovered” (e.g. Halberstam, 2005), it reinforces Kaat’s status as a constructed, and maybe even spurious, woman, and therefore not a suitable partner for a hegemonically masculine heterosexual male. Toon’s poetic ode to Kaat is quickly forgotten in favor of a disgruntled performance of a man betrayed, not by a loved one, which would have provided room for a happy ending, but by his own feelings. He afterwards blames not only his friends, who he felt should have warned him about Kaat’s past, but to a larger degree himself, because of his faulty perception of Kaat’s “true nature.” In and by itself, this only peripherally reinforces Kaat’s status as a constructed woman, as the other characters still treat her as they would any other female in the soap. Their interaction with Toon, however, does reinforce the idea that Kaat is only nearly-a-woman, in the sense that they never reprimand Toon because of the inherent hypocrisy he displays by suddenly switching from affection to disgust, but because he breaks the taboo of perceived transphobia. Indeed, if they wished to convey the idea that Kaat is a woman – which she was at the moment Toon discovered who she was in her life before the transition – one of the characters might have pointed to this inconvenient reality within Toon’s discourse. However, the focus constantly lies on him not being able to accept Kaat for who she is, rather than scolding him for his archaic and monolithic conceptions of his own sexual and gender identity.

Similar tendencies in reaffirming the constructed nature of transpeople also surface in the Flemish written press. Interestingly, Flemish transnegative discourses display a subtly different *modus operandi* than those found in Anglophone discourses, which further affirms the safeguarding of gender identities assigned by biology while also privileging the post-op transsexual as the only valid transgender identity. Where Anglophone transnegative discourse focuses rather heavily on people – relying on terminology such as “tranny,” “shemale,” or “ladyboy” regardless of the specific self-identification of transpeople – Flemish transnegativity tends to mock the procedure rather than the results. In spite of numerous attempts by advocacy groups to inform journalists of non-derogatory language to use when writing about sexual and gender diversity (e.g. Van Baelen, 2011), journalists often refer to gender reassignment surgery by using the inherently offensive term “ombouwen” (“rebuilding”) (e.g. “Tam Tam,” 2015; “van Olympisch Kampioen tot Transgendervrouw,” 2015; “Jaar van de Transvrouw,” 2015). In Dutch, one uses this word when referring to the remodeling of a shed to a pool house or a bicycle to a fixed gear, and it is very insulting when used to refer to surgical gender transition. Equivalents to the English slurs referring to people who have “undergone” a gender transition, however, are not prevalent in Flanders. Mocking the procedure rather than the identities themselves again serves the double purpose of safeguarding biological sex opposed to chosen gender

while also privileging those who have undergone the entire process of being “rebuilt,” as they no longer occupy an intermediary position on the gender spectrum.

## Beautiful at last

The notion of “rebuilding” may also be found in more subtle terms in both the trans narrative featured in *Thuis* and the mediated public debate in Flemish newspapers. Instead of the identity-based dimensions that a trans journey involves, the physical appearance after the transition is prominently displayed in both instances.

In *Thuis*, this is another result of the elliptical way Kaat’s journey was presented in the narrative. Because her actual trans journey took place off screen, no narrative space was created to include meaningful dialogues between herself and her relatives and friends about the identity crisis she went through, diminishing the opportunity to address the emotional and mental processes underlying such a journey. The other characters in the show were merely presented a *fait accompli* – Franky had become Kaat – and could therefore easily maneuver their way out of difficult discussions about gender identities in favor of rather superficial comments about her new looks. In fact, no single conversation between Kaat and another character after her much-anticipated return home touched on the subject of the motivations behind and feelings regarding her gender transition, yet every single one of those conversations included a celebratory comment on her physical appearance. Of course, Toon’s initial infatuation with the “mysterious blonde woman” further enforces the weight given to the beauty of post-op transwomen. This tendency is largely paralleled in the newspaper coverage, especially on transwomen. Approximately 25% of the articles in the sample comprised coverage of transwomen winning beauty pageants (e.g. “Deze Miss was 4 jaar geleden nog jongen,” 2015; “Zelfs in jongenslichaam droomde ze van titel,” 2015; Van Dieper, 2015), competing in television reality shows about modelling (e.g. “Transgender wint topmodelwedstrijd,” 2015; “Transgender wint Holland’s Next Topmodel,” 2015), being featured in marketing campaigns (e.g. Clincke, 2015), or simply frame physical beauty as a defining element of a “successful transition” (e.g. Vermeiren, 2015; Mulder, 2015). Moreover, coverage that does not explicitly position physical appearance as “make or break” in terms of the success of a gender transition regularly features interviews with transwomen who allude to their longing for hegemonic conceptions of feminine beauty.

Again, this tendency operates in a dyadic fashion. On the one hand, it creates another clear-cut intelligible narrative centered around a possibly attainable ideal that draws attention from bothersome reflections on gender identity towards an easily readable end goal (i.e. not only passing

as a woman, but passing as a gorgeous woman). Once more, the spectrum is disregarded in favor of the binary. On the other hand, it yet again privileges those transpeople that actively conform to hegemonic gender norms, especially those revolving around the physical attributes of femininity. In doing so, the subversively queer potential of people that do not conform to binary conceptions of gender is alienated and contained, while the next best thing to the binary regime of gender is upheld.

## Conclusion

Both Kaat's trans narrative presented to Flemish audiences in *Thuis* and the trans coverage found in the Flemish written press are undoubtedly active in the formation of homogenizing and normative discourses governing trans identities and experiences in Flanders. While gender mobility in the form of a surgical transition is constructed as a viable solution for those people who do not wish to adhere to their assigned sex, gender remains subjected to an utterly binary system of knowledge in Flanders. It is quite acceptable for an A to become a Z, or perhaps even vice versa; choosing to be an F, O, or Q is another matter entirely. Contemporary discourses in Flemish media privilege gender conformity in trans identities, while symbolically annihilating those performances, practices, and identities that destabilize hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality.

This is effected through several different yet interlocking mechanisms active in assigning meaning to transgenderism. First, and foremost of these mechanisms, when the moniker "transgender" is employed in Flemish discourse on gender diversity, it denotes an almost ready-made pattern of completely crossing over from one monolithic gender to the other. The surgical transition is therefore conceived as the logical and mandatory goal of a trans identity. As Evan Vipond (2015) observes, this does not fully restore the dominant gender order, but establishes a regime of transnormativity that depoliticizes trans identities and neutralizes their subversive potential. The discursive weight assigned to post-op transsexuality is complemented by the symbolic annihilation of the trans journey and the illusion of clarity woven around trans identities. The subversively queer intermediary space between the two dominant gender formations is perpetually denied in favor of hegemonic conceptions of male and female that may be chosen from, but not deconstructed altogether. The strong focus on physical beauty as the prime attribute of a successful transition further enforces this dynamic, urging transwomen to conform to the reigning ideals constructed around feminine beauty.

The articulations of transnationalism – in this case a variant on Jasbir Puar's (2007; 2013) homonationalism – found in the Flemish mediated public debate further strengthen the interpretation of the trans discourse in Flanders as conservative and even reactionary. Transphobic violence, in its

physical or symbolic form, has been prevalent in Flanders, yet its manifestations are reported in only two specific cases; rather, the violence either takes place abroad or is perpetrated by ethnic-cultural minorities. This discursive formation constructs Flanders as a space of tolerance and enlightenment, and operates to articulate the Flemish attitude towards gender diversity as open and progressive. Furthermore, in the contemporary socio-political climate in Western Europe, this discourse resonates well with xenophobic rhetoric, ideologically alienating the “conservative other.”

## Notes

Almaar Mooier maar Minder Krachtig. (2016, March 30). *Het Laatste Nieuws*, p. 39.

Battles, K., & Hilton-Morrow, W. (2002). Gay characters in conventional spaces: *Will and Grace* and the situation comedy genre. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 19(1), 87–105.

Buekenhoudt, S. (2016, January 21). Ik Ben het toch al Gewoon dat Mensen Naar Mij Kijken. *Het Nieuwsblad*, p. 6.

Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender*. London: Routledge.

Carvalho, A. (2008). Media(ted) discourse and society. *Journalism Studies*, 9(2), 161–177.

Centrum voor Informatie over de Media. (2016, June). *Top 20 Programma's Noord 06/2016*. Retrieved from <http://www.cim.be/nl/televisie/openbare-resultaten>

Chambers, S. (2009). *The queer politics of television: Reading contemporary television*. London: I. B. Tauris.

Clemens, K. (2016, February 27). IVF, Homohuwelijk, en Transgenders: Ik Symboliseer Alles wat Fundamentalisten Haten. *Het Nieuwsblad*, p. 18.

Clincke, L. (2016, March 5). Spiegeltje, Spiegeltje aan de Wand, Wie is het Authentiekste van het Land? *De Standaard*, p. 7.

Davis, G., & Needham, G. (Eds.). (2009). *Queer TV: Theories, histories, policies*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Debaets, B. (2016, June 15). De Onhoudbare Golf van Gelijke Rechten. *De Morgen*, p. 31.

Deze Miss was 4 Jaar Geleden Nog Jongen. (2015, June 25). *Het Laatste Nieuws*, p. 1.

- Dhaenens, F. (2015). Reading gay music videos: An inquiry into the representation of sexual diversity in contemporary popular music videos. *Popular Music and Society*, 39(5), 1–15.
- Dhoest, A. (2007). The national everyday in contemporary European television fiction: The case of Flanders. *Critical Studies in Television*, 2(2), 60–76.
- Fausto-Sterling, A. (2002). *Sexing the body: Gender politics and the construction of sexuality*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Forsyth, C. J., & Copes, H. (2014). *Encyclopedia of social deviance*. London: Sage
- Franco, J. (2001). Cultural identity in the community soap: A comparative analysis of *Thuis* (At Home) and *EastEnders*. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 4(4), 449–472.
- Halberstam, J. (2005). *In a queer time and place*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Hines, S. (2006). What's the difference? Bringing particularity to queer studies of transgender. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 15(1), 49–66.
- Hobson, D. (2003). *Soap opera*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Jaar Van de Transvrouw (2015, December 30). *Het Laatste Nieuws*, p. 35.
- Keller, S. E. (1999). Crisis of authority: Medical rhetoric and transsexual identity. *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism*, 11, 5.
- Larsen, P. (2002). Mediated fiction. In K. B. Jensen (Ed.), *A handbook of media and communication research: Qualitative and quantitative methods*. London: Routledge.
- Liebes, T., & Livingstone, S. M. (1992). Mothers and lovers: Managing women's role conflicts in American and British soap operas. In J. G. Blumler, J. M. McLeod, & K. E. Rosengren (Eds.), *Comparatively speaking: Communication and culture across space and time* (pp. 94–120). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Lombardi, E. L., Wilchins, R. A., Priesing, D., & Malouf, D. (2002). Gender violence: Transgender experiences with violence and discrimination. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 42(1), 89–101.
- Lotz, A. D. (2014). *Cable guys: Television and masculinities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Lovelock, M. (2016). Call me Caitlyn: Making and 'making over' the authentic transgender body in Anglo-American popular culture. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 1–13.
- Maas, M. (2016, March 13). Homo's Moeten Behandeld Worden voor hun Ziekte. *De Morgen*, p. 15.



- Meyer, D. (2012). An intersectional analysis of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people's evaluations of anti-queer violence. *Gender & Society*, 26(6), 849–873.
- Michiels, A. (2015, December 12). Mijn Eerste Kerst als Vrouw. *Het Laatste Nieuws*, p. 38.
- Motmans, J. (2012). *Transfoob Geweld en Discriminatie van Transgenders: Een Infobrochure voor Politiediensten en Meldpunten*. Leuven: Provincie Vlaams Brabant.
- Mulder, V. (2015, July 11). Je Leest dit Verhaal omdat KIM KARDASHIAN in de Kop Staat. *De Morgen*, p. 44.
- Parys, L. (2016, June 17). Religieuze Leiders: het is Tijd voor een Stevig Gesprek. *De Morgen*, p. 2.
- Prostituee Gedood omdat ze Transgender Was. (2015, December 2). *Het Nieuwsblad*, p. 16.
- Puar, J. (2007). *Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Puar, J. (2013). Rethinking homonationalism. *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 45, 336–339.
- Remmery, S. (2015, October 22). Ben I keen Jongen of een Meisje? Zelfs Kleuters Twijfelen Al. *Het Nieuwsblad*, p. 4.
- Saeys, F. (2007). *Audiovisuele Media I*. Unpublished Reader. Ghent: Ghent University.
- Samuel, C. (2013). Symbolic violence and collective identity: Pierre Bourdieu and the ethics of resistance. *Social Movement Studies*, 12(4), 397–413.
- Schuh, C. A. (2006). Being Lisa: Discourses of gender and transsexual identity. *Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research*, 5, 35–56.
- Simpson, J. A., & Weiner, E. C. S. (1991). *The Oxford English dictionary* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Stryker, S. (2004). Transgender studies: Queer theory's evil twin. *CLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 10(2), 212–215.
- Stryker, S. (2006). My words to Victor Frankenstein above the village of Chamounix: Performing transgender rage. In S. Stryker, & S. Whittle (Eds.), *The transgender studies reader* (pp. ). London: Routledge
- Sullivan, K. E. (2000). Ed Gein and the figure of the transgendered serial killer. *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 4, 38–47.

- Tam Tam. (2015, September 12). *Het Laatste Nieuws*, p. 6.
- Tebutt, C. (2013). Transgender History SUSAN STRYKER, Bodies in Doubt: An American History of Intersex ELIZABETH REIS. *Women's History Review*, 22(3), 505–509.
- Transgender Wint Holland's Next Topmodel. (2015, October 28). *Het Laatste Nieuws*, p. 43.
- Transgender Wint Nederlandse Topmodelwedstrijd. (2015, October 28). *Het Nieuwsblad*, p. 15.
- Transgender Aangevallen in Brussel. (2016, June 15). *De Morgen*, p. 5.
- Transgender (26) 'door IS'ers' Neergestoken in Etterbeek. (2016, June 15). *Het Laatste Nieuws*, p. 2.
- Van Baelen, J. (2011). *Voorbij Het Cliché: Over Genuanceerde Beeldvorming*. Brussels: Vlaamse Overheid – Gelijke Kansen in Vlaanderen.
- Vandenweghe, H. (2016, April 1). Ik Droomde ervan om Wakker te Worden als Vrouw. *Het Nieuwsblad*, p. 6.
- Van Dieper, T. (2015, November 28). Ik Kijk al Uit Naar de Bikini-Ronde. *Het Nieuwsblad*, p. 4.
- Vanhoof, E., & Debaets, B. (2016, May 12). Gender zit niet alleen in de Broek. *De Standaard*, p. 40.
- Vanlommel, S. (2015, September 11). Vechter met een Gebroken Zwaard. *De Morgen*, p. 9.
- Van Olympisch kampioen tot Transgendervrouw. (2015, September 19). *Het Laatste Nieuws*, p. 89.
- Vermeiren, S. (2015, June 25). Ja, ik ben Transgender, en dan? *Het Laatste Nieuws*, p. 5.
- Vermeiren, S. (2015, October 21). Ik Wil Nooit Meer Terug. *De Morgen*, p. 10.
- Vipond, E. (2015). Resisting transnormativity: Challenging the medicalization and regulation of trans bodies. *Theory in Action*, 8(2), 21–44.
- Vos, C. (2004). *Bewegend verleden: inleiding in de analyse van films en televisieprogramma's*. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Boom.
- Wilchins, R. (1997). *Read my lips: Sexual subversion and the end of gender*. Ann Arbor: Firebrand Books.
- Zelfs in Jongenslichaam Droomde ze van Titel. (2015, July 4). *Het Laatste Nieuws*, p. 48.